

THE EXPERIENCES OF JAPANESE AMERICAN MIXED RACE YOUNG ADULTS:
A STUDY OF IDENTITY FORMATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of Japanese American mixed race young adults and the effects that being mixed race has had on their identity formation. Specifically, it addresses how being mixed race affected other aspects of their lives, such as family, social relationships, school, and self-esteem. Using a qualitative study, seven mixed-race young adults were asked to answer a series of questions in a semi-structured interview. The results of the study indicated that students did not encounter significant health or emotional setbacks due to their mixed race identity. Rather, respondents voiced their unique experiences and showed that over time, they have come to view their mixed race heritage as a positive aspect of their lives.

To Mom, Dad, Jamie, and Christopher. Thanks for all you do.

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The Experiences of Japanese American Mixed Race Young Adults:
A Study of Identity Formation

Introduction

If I was a couch and a chair, I wouldn't call myself just a chair or just a couch....maybe I'd call myself a loveseat. The same thing goes with being mixed race. You can't identify with just one race - you're something unique.

- Respondent #2

I'm Japanese American and I identify myself as that 100 percent of the time. I don't really even think of myself as being mixed race unless other people bring it up.

- Respondent #1

It's funny when people ask you what you are because I always just say I'm American and that my heritage is Japanese. I think it's a misconception that people think that Americans are only white.

- Respondent #5

Racial identity and the experiences of mixed race individuals cannot be pinpointed or even approximated. As the previous quotations illustrate, racial identity is something ambiguous, something that differs from person to person, or even situation to situation. The first quotation stresses the need to identify with both races, claim both cultures, and to understand the unique qualities that come with being mixed race. The second quotation brings in the notion of identifying with a single race. The third claims to identify with another category or to focus less on one's racial identity completely.

As the population of mixed race young adults continues to grow in the United States, identity formation for these individuals becomes pertinent as well. According to Stephen & Stephen (1989), the rate of intermarriage among most minority group members is relatively high and continues to rise. In addition, mixed race children seem particularly likely to marry outside their own ethnic group. Thus, on an individual level, a growing number of mixed race people must face the issue of their own ethnic identity.

Mixed race can be defined as those individuals who identify with two or more racial groups. Because little research has been done to depict the experiences of Japanese American mixed race young adults, this research will seek to understand: according to Japanese American mixed race young adults, what experiences affected their identity formation? Through a qualitative study, I explored how being mixed race shaped young adults' self-perceptions, and affected other aspects of their lives, such as family, social relationships, school, and self-esteem.

As stated by Oware (2003), early research taken from the 1920s and 1930s suggests that people of mixed race were often depicted as "tragic mulattos" with marginalized identities. During this time, these individuals were portrayed as "aberrations" to society, signifying their inherent inferiority. These studies are problematic, however, as they represent mixed race adolescents as "marginal" or inferior beings, and often blame problems on the young adult's lack of racial identity (p. 21).

However, in contrast to early literature, more current literature addresses mixed race individuals as both "fluid and dynamic" (Oware, 2003, p. 25), where some research depicts no differences between mixed race and single race young people (Cooney & Radina, 2000; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996; Radina & Cooney, 2000; Stephen & Stephen, 1991), while other literature attests to the greater emotional and health risks encountered by those of mixed race heritage (Udry, 2003).

Phinney & Alipuria (1996) found that mixed race young adults did not differ from single race young adults in their measure of self-esteem. In some cases, mixed race students had more positive attitudes towards other groups. This study, utilizing a large sample of both multiethnic and monoethnic students, demonstrated reliable results.

However, all participants came from two California Universities, making this study difficult to generalize to the larger population. Similarly, Stephan & Stephan (1991) found no negative effects for young people socialized bi-culturally. Moreover, this study demonstrated that mixed race students appeared to have better relations with single race students than the single race students had with one another. They also found that these students might be exposed to a broader range of norms, values, roles and behaviors than students of single race households. In addition, results of this study suggested that being socialized by parents of different races could avert the children from the ethnocentrism often brought about in single race individuals, and could also lead to a greater appreciation for their own culture. Cooney and Radina (2000) also compared single race and mixed race young adults, and found that "significant differences were found on fewer than half of the school, behavioral, and psychological dimensions that were assessed" (p. 433). In addition, the quality of child/parent relationships was comparable between single race and mixed race young people (Radina & Cooney, 2000).

In contrast to the previous research indicating minimal or no differences between mixed race young adults, Udry (2003) did find greater risks associated with being mixed race. Udry's study explained the high-risk status of mixed race young people as stemming from the struggle for identity formation, leading to lack of self-esteem, social isolation, and problems of family dynamics in mixed race households. He observed that mixed race young adults also showed higher health and behavior risks than did single race young adults. Higher risk factors included general health, school experiences, smoking, drinking, and other risk variables. The results of this study showed some inconsistencies, as some respondents gave differing answers to two similar surveys. However, most

results depicting mixed race young adults as having higher risks showed reliability through the use of a controlled analysis to test for outside variable interference.

Although it is disputed whether mixed race adolescents encounter risks due to identity formation, most researchers do agree that racial identity among mixed race adolescents is varied and dynamic (Cooney & Radina, 2000; Oware, 2003; Renn, 2003). Consistent with this belief, Renn (2003) identifies Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Model as a framework for understanding racial identity. Within this framework, special attention is paid to environmental influences on human development. This model requires "examination of multiperson systems of interaction not limited to a single setting and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation" (p. 386). Thus, one's racial identity must be viewed within the framework of an interactive, multisystem, and dynamic environment, rather than within a single context.

In accordance with the framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecology model, two theories have been utilized to explain the racial identification for mixed-race individuals. According to identity theory, which will be followed throughout this research, individuals racially identify themselves "based on the quality and quantity of the bonds they have with people of various races" (Oware, 2003, p. 37). Thus, racial identity and sense of self may be influenced by those with whom the young adult associates. Status maximization theory, however, speculates that mixed race adolescents will adopt the racial identity of the parent with the higher social status. Specifically, the theory notes that mixed-race adolescents understand the hierarchy of racial statuses, and they may wish to identify themselves with the more highly esteemed of their parents' races (Oware, 2003). Both of

these theories maintain that racial identity is formed through the mixed race adolescent's relationships and environment, and that these relationships are dynamic and flexible.

In the following sections, a qualitative study was used to assess the experiences of seven mixed race young adults. They described how their unique experiences affected their identity formation, and how their mixed race in turn affected other aspects of their lives.

Methods

For this interpretive study, a descriptive strategy and cross-sectional design were used to study the self-perceptions of seven Japanese American mixed race young adults ages 18 to 21. A young adult, college-age population was chosen for two reasons. First, ethnic identity becomes a pertinent issue during this time, as young adults become increasingly independent. Second, the availability of young adults was much greater than other age groups. Respondents were selected on the basis of their racial make-up, each being at least 25%, but less than 100% Japanese American.

The following lists each respondent's racial make-up and a brief description of the location in which they grew up: Respondent #1 is half Japanese and half Hispanic. He was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah until his family relocated to Sandy, Utah when he was 10. Respondent #2, who was also born and raised in Salt Lake City, is half Japanese and half Caucasian. Respondent #3 is half Japanese and half African American and grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah. Respondent #4 who is half Japanese and half Caucasian was also born and raised in Salt Lake City. Respondent #5 is half Japanese and half Caucasian and was born in Salt Lake City, but moved to Murray, Utah at age six. Respondent #6 is one quarter Japanese and three quarters Caucasian and lives in Murray,

Utah. Respondent #7 is half Japanese and half Caucasian and was born in Salt Lake City, before moving to the Silicon Valley area of California at age three.

Availability sampling and typical case sampling were used to select the seven mixed race young adults who consented to participate in this research study. Prior to the study, each respondent was asked to complete an informed consent form obtained from the researcher. Using individual semi-structured interviews, the seven mixed race young adults were asked to respond to a series of open-ended and closed-ended questions regarding their identity formation and experiences with family, social relationships, school, and self-esteem. Conducted in the researcher's home or another quiet setting, all interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Nominal measures were then used to categorize data collected. The following section will describe the results of these interviews.

Results

The results for this study are organized into several categories: (a) how respondents identified themselves (b) their response to being mixed race (c) experiences with family (d) experiences with school (e) experiences with social relationships and (f) their feelings concerning their self-esteem.

How Respondents Identified Themselves

During the interview, respondents were asked to identify their racial make up, followed by a disclosure of how they personally identify themselves when asked, "What are you?" Respondent #1 asserted that he is half Japanese and half Hispanic, but identifies himself as Japanese "100% of the time." Half Japanese American and half Canadian, Respondent #2 identified himself as "Japa-Canadian." When asked why he

chooses to identify himself this way, he reports that he is not fully Japanese nor fully Caucasian, thus, he wouldn't fully identify with either race. Respondent #3, who is half Japanese American and half African American, also chooses to identify herself as such, reporting she would rather have people know from the start exactly what her racial make up is. Respondent #4 agrees, telling others she is half Japanese. "I think it would be sort of unfair to my parents if I identified one way or another, and sort of unfair to me too, I guess," she states. Unlike the other six respondents, Respondent #5 thinks of himself as "American first and that my heritage is Japanese." But he does agree that on applications or censuses he writes Japanese or Asian, saying his father's Japanese heritage has greatly influenced him. Like Respondent #1, Respondent #6 identifies simply as Japanese. However, when others ask him if he is "full or half" Japanese he usually tells them he is a quarter Japanese. "I have brown hair, brown eyes, and brown skin so basically I look Japanese," he articulates. "I usually say I'm Japanese because of all the races in me, it's the biggest chunk, everything else is just little parts." He once asked his mom what exactly he was. "She told me I was Japanese, English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, German, and I think a little Russian," he laughs. "I'm kind of a mutt." Similarly, Respondent #7 calls herself Japanese as well, asserting that "most people don't even think I'm half [white] because I don't look white at all so I just say I'm Japanese because I look more like that."

Respondent #1, #3, #5, and #6 all claim that they identify themselves in this way all the time, no matter what the context. However, Respondent #2 and #4 admitted that, in some cases, they would identify themselves differently: "If you're applying to a college and you want to give yourself an edge, you may want to claim to be a certain race,"

Respondent #2 confesses. Respondent #4 agrees, adding that she identifies as both races unless saying she is just Japanese will help her achieve some end. Changes in environment affected how Respondent #7 identified herself. She notes that when she is in an Asian community, other Asians will see her and know that she is only "half." "If I go get a pedicure at an Asian salon, the Asian lady doing my nails can tell that I'm half, so when they ask, I will tell them I'm half Japanese and half white, rather than just Japanese."

Their Response to Being Mixed Race

In response to how they felt concerning their mixed race heritage, respondents generally answered positively. Respondent #1 said he felt "good" about being mixed race and enjoyed having a different culture than others around him. He further notes that he doesn't dwell on his mixed race heritage at all. In fact, he admits that he "rarely thinks about it."

Respondent #2 echoed this by saying he enjoys being part of "two communities" and getting to experience two different cultures. However, he also stated that not being fully accepted by either community was difficult for him at times. "But I think everyone who is mixed race has felt like this at one point in their lives," he adds. He further credits that people in Salt Lake City are very accepting [of mixed race individuals] maybe more so than those from other areas.

Respondent #3 has grown to accept and love her mixed race identity. "I'm black and Japanese and that's what I'm saying forever," she reports. "I'm very proud to be black and Japanese." Although she feels quite positive about her mixed race heritage now, Respondent #3 felt that growing up mixed race was a difficult experience. "I got

teased a lot because of my skin, my eyes not being slanted, and because I didn't have a flat face" she confesses. She also recalls other children in elementary school calling her a "Chink" and thinking nothing of it. However, the change of becoming more comfortable with her mixed race heritage came when her parents divorced. While living with her mother, Respondent #3 discovered she was fine with her race: "I never told my mom [what was happening in my life] because she was always at work." Instead, she began to keep a journal of what happened to her so she could "figure her life out." She would pick out famous quotes at the library and then write them in her journal, always comparing herself to the person quoted. "Sometimes I don't like to read them because it makes me cry," she recalls; "I think, 'Oh my God, what happened to me here that made me write about this quote?'" She remembers finding one quote from a Middle Eastern woman who came to the United States with a scarf around her head, and people were making fun of her. I remember I wrote, "I have a scarf around my head."

Being a part of two racial groups has become acceptable for Respondent #4 as well. She even asserts that most of the time she doesn't even think about her ethnicity. Only when she is surrounded by others who are all Japanese or all white does she feel somewhat out of place. "Dancing at the Obon Festival I felt kind of out of place because I wasn't entirely Japanese and because I didn't normally go to the Buddhist Church where the festival is held." But she notes that most of the time she is more worried about what others are thinking about her than about her mixed race heritage.

Respondent #5 says he has come to accept being mixed race and is happy with who he is. "My parents are the best people in the world and I wouldn't change having

different backgrounds,” he affirms. He feels that his mixed race is not a “huge deal” in his life and that most people won’t point it out or mention it.

Like Respondent #2, Respondent #6 likes taking “the good things out of both worlds” and takes pride in being mixed race. He does note, however, that every once in awhile he does wish he was full Japanese “so my kids could come out more Japanese,” he declares. Yet, he adds that the “physique and build” he has is a positive attribute that can be credited to his mixed race heritage. “I’m not super tall but I’m not super short, either,” he boasts. “I liked the way I turned out.” The only negative feeling he has toward his mixed race is that others often think he is neither Japanese nor Caucasian. “I hate when people think I’m Mexican,” he adds. “I’m proud of who I am even though sometimes I get called a ‘Spick.’”

Similarly, Respondent #7 enjoys living in the “two different worlds” that being mixed race offers. She likes experiencing her Japanese side of the family, like the New Year’s celebration with traditional Japanese food. Yet, she also enjoys visiting her father’s side of the family who live in Kentucky, which offers a completely different lifestyle. “It’s just nice to see different types of people and know I’m part of both,” she reveals. However, she adds that not fitting into each one completely can be challenging.

Experiences with Family

Each respondent reported unique experiences with his or her parents and family while growing up, and felt that these experiences did affect his or her identity formation. Respondent #1 noted that he has a “great” relationship with his Japanese American mother, but no involvement with his biological father who is Hispanic. Because he grew up only associating with his mother’s family, he is only familiar with his Japanese culture

and therefore, identifies as “100% Japanese American.” Although he may not look “100% Japanese” to some, Respondent #1 does not feel that his family treats him any differently because he is mixed race. “I was raised Japanese,” he asserts, “and my family treats me that way.”

Respondent #2 has a very open relationship with both his parents. However, he notes that he is closer to his mother’s side of the family because they live on the west coast. His mother’s Japanese American culture has greatly influenced his involvement in the Japanese community. She introduced him to the Japanese Church of Christ in Salt Lake City and he now serves on the Board of Directors for the Salt Lake Chapter of the Japanese American Citizen League.

Respondent #3 describes being very close to her Japanese American mother who has helped her understand her mixed race heritage. “My mom taught me about my two different cultures and I feel very blessed about that.” Her mother, who teaches Asian American studies at the University of Utah, has always taught her about her Asian heritage, through Asian books and by allowing her to observe her classes. Respondent #3 also identifies with her African American culture through visits with her cousins in Atlanta, Georgia. There, she was treated as simply “one of the kids,”: “I got the whip. I got the switch. I got the same thing as everyone else.” Although they made fun of her Utah accent at times, they never treated her differently because of her mixed race. Although her mother understood the difficulties of being mixed race, Respondent #3 felt her father never fully recognized what she had to go through. “He thought I’d be fine with it [her mixed race heritage],” she adds. In addition to her mother, Respondent #3 could look to her older sister and African American family friend for support.

Respondent #4 also affirms that she is close to both her parents, but talks to her mom more because her dad is on the quiet side. She insists that her parents and extended family don't treat her differently due to her mixed race, but rather, she sometimes feels self conscious or out of place because of how she looks. "Sometimes I feel like when I'm in public with my mom that people don't believe we're related," she declares. "And a lot of times if I'm with my mom and my friend who has lighter hair, they think she is my mom's daughter. It's weird but it doesn't really bother me." When asked if she felt out of place on either side of her extended family, she stated, "Oh yeah, I feel like that on both sides actually." On her mother's side she says she often feels out of place at weddings because everyone is Caucasian with blonde hair. But she insists that her "out of place" feelings do not stem from negative treatment by family members, but rather are in her own mind.

Respondent #5 also notes having good relationships with both his mother and father. However, since he is the only boy in his family, he is close to his dad. "He's like my buddy...and I really look up to him because he's brought me up to be understanding and tolerant." Respondent #5 remembers one experience, in particular, in which his father taught him an important lesson. "We were at Walmart and there was this sign that advertised 'Jap Maples.' I didn't realize it at the time because I was only eight, but it really meant something to my dad and he went to go point it out to the people working at the store." Respondent #5 notes that his father did not accuse the employees of being racist, but simply told them it wasn't acceptable to use the term "Jap." The incident "just kind of taught me to respect and not be angry, but help to teach others." With his extended family, Respondent #5 notes that he is close with both sides, but generally gets

together with his dad's side of the family more. He grew up going to his grandparents' house on his dad's side. Because of this, he received more of an Asian sense of culture as a child. He also maintains that there was only one incident that made him feel "not fully Asian" while growing up. "I remember my grandma [on my dad's side] was talking about the Nissei (first generation Japanese Americans) and I was like 'what am I' and she was like, 'Well, you're not full.' I know she didn't mean anything bad by it because I know she loves me, but it just felt weird." On his mother's side, Respondent #5 doesn't recall them ever mentioning anything about him being only half Caucasian.

Claiming he is close to both his parents, Respondent #6 reveals that his mother and father each offer different perspectives and qualities that have helped him become a well-rounded person. "My dad and I are a lot alike so even though we butt heads sometimes, I really look up to him," he states. He also maintains a good relationship with his mother, who he says can be counted on to give advice and help him understand things better. With his extended family, Respondent #6 notes that his father's side of the family is simply "one big family." "We're all really close," he notes, "I know my third cousins like they were my first cousins." He reveals, however, that his mother's side of the family doesn't get together nearly as much as his father's side. When asked if his extended family treated him any differently due to his mixed race, Respondent #6 answers that neither side treated him any differently. With his father's side of the family, he was always taught to carry on traditional Japanese culture. "They [his grandparents] wanted to try to keep traditions alive and carry it down with the kids," he acknowledges.

Respondent #7 maintains a close relationship with both her parents and says this is partly because she is an only child. However, she affirms that there are differences in

her relationship with each of her parents. Over the years, she has noticed that Asian people tend to show less emotion and affection, especially in public. "I first started noticing this in high school when some of my white friends would say 'I love you' to each other and give hugs. It was just weird. And then I thought about it, and I am more affectionate with my dad than I am with my [Japanese American] mom." She notices the same trend with her extended family. Her grandparents on her mother's side tend to be less affectionate, but show their love in different ways. They always send money or gifts when she visits and show immense hospitality. When asked if her extended family treated her differently due to her mixed race, she answered that her mother's side of the family "did not treat me any different than the rest of my cousins who are full Japanese." She notes that on her father's side, there were times when she felt her grandmother wished she were full white. When talking with her dad about this, Respondent #6 felt that her dad's mother may have preferred that her father marry a white woman, but this may be due in part to the Southern community she lives in. However, Respondent #6 doesn't feel that her grandmother loves her any less because she is half Japanese. "There were times when I felt like she didn't think I was as pretty and stuff like that. But I think that was just in my head, because she never treated me in a way that would make me feel like that."

Experiences with School

Respondents also voiced varying responses to their experiences in school and how these experiences affected their identity formation. Respondent #1 explained that he received mostly Bs and Cs in high school, and feels that his grades were not influenced by his mixed race heritage. Furthermore, he feels that his teachers and peers treated him the

same as they did other students, and that his mixed race identity was not a major factor in his high school or college experience.

Respondent #2 also reported a positive experience in school. Attending the International Baccalaureate program at his high school, Respondent #2 felt that the small program was fairly diverse. "I liked it," he states, "because you were judged more on your academics than your race." However, he does recall one example of how his mixed race heritage affected his school experience. While sitting in his Spanish class, Respondent #2 began talking with a fellow student of Jewish background. As they were talking, she blatantly said, "You're such a JAP!" When he informed her that this was a derogatory term, the girl looked surprised. "She didn't realize it offended me because I didn't look Japanese," he remembers. However, the girl was actually referring to the term "Jewish American Princess." "In her community it was a type of compliment and we both interpreted it the wrong way," he recalls. However, Respondent #2's overall experience was positive and he reports receiving good grades in high school and at the University of Utah.

Respondent #3 has encountered both positive and negative experiences in school due to her mixed race heritage. In elementary school other children often thought she was adopted because she had dark skin, but an Asian mom. "I even thought I was adopted," she laughs, "but my mom would always assure me that I wasn't!" Although other children often teased her for "pretending" to be Japanese, her teachers always supported her. However, her high school experience has been better. "My friends here now are great," she acknowledges. She reports having many different minority friends who treat her well and have stayed with her through junior high and high school.

Like Respondent #2, Respondent #4 attended the International Baccalaureate program at her high school and thinks of herself as “a pretty good student.” Her experiences in school were positive. Involved in the school newspaper and student government, Respondent #4 stressed that this allowed her to associate with a diverse group of students, which she found beneficial. She states that her group of friends often made racist jokes, but they were all in good fun. “Some people would tease me about my name,” she recalls, “but nothing really bothered me. This girl who’s a friend of mine would call us ‘Cracker-Japs’ or ‘rice cracker’ which is actually kind of funny in a sad way!”

A student who has always done well in school and enjoys learning, Respondent #5 believes that his mixed race has affected his experiences in school. Being half Asian, he feels that “there is the preconception that Asians are smart” and that some view him as “nerdy” because of his Asian heritage. However, he does not feel that others have treated him negatively because of this.

Similar to the previous respondent, Respondent #6 feels that his school experiences were affected by his mixed race. “I was proud of it [his mixed race],” he offers, “and I wanted to show it.” He maintains that the pride he has for his culture did affect how other students treated him in high school. “People knew I had a sore spot when they used derogatory names against me,” he discloses. He claims that this affected him because it often led him to get into fights with other students.

Respondent #7 remarks that attending school in California allowed her to associate with a diverse group of students. She claims that during her middle school and high school years, she did sometimes feel she was judged by her race. “Like people will

think that I don't speak English or that I play the violin and I'm really smart and not athletic." At the first high school she attended, she felt like she had to be white in order to be popular. But she believes this was something internal because no one ever said any racist comments to her. She notes, however, that she didn't feel this way too often, especially when she attended a second high school, which was almost fifty percent Asian. "I don't really like to hang out with Asian people because I don't like to feel like I'm in that group just because I'm Asian," she comments. She claims that most of her friends come from diverse backgrounds. One is Indian and the other is Jewish.

Experiences with Social Relationships

Respondents also voiced their experiences with social relationships growing up. Respondent #1 notes that throughout his life he has had some minority friends, but mostly white friends and is "cool with that." He feels that being a different race than his friends did not affect his relationships with them. "They treated me the same way as everyone else," he states. In fact, Respondent #1 reported that he enjoyed having a different culture than those around him. In the Japanese American community, Respondent #1 says he feels at home because there are many others in the Japanese American community who are mixed race: "It's not like I think to myself, 'Oh my God, I'm mixed race, what am I going to do with all these people?'" He reports that he does not dwell on his racial background and that others in the community "don't really bring it up as an issue."

Respondent #2 feels that his mixed race heritage allowed him to take part in more cultural activities and befriend others who were like him, "because you have similar interests and experiences." He does, however, recall the experience of attending an Evangelical camp in California and feeling out of place due to his mixed race. The camp

was administered by the Japanese Evangelical Mission, and most of the camp participants were full blooded Japanese American: "They were from the west coast and had a very negative stigma about those who were not full Japanese." He recalls being the only person in his cabin who was "half" and was cast as an outsider. "They would call me names like 'Happa Howlie,'" he recalls. Overall, however, he voices that living in Utah has taught him that, "it's not a bad thing to be different because a lot of people here are the same."

Respondent #3 reports having positive social relationships now, but this was not always the case. In elementary school, Respondent #3 remembers how a friend's mother was very against her daughter having a "black friend." When she slept over at her friend's house, her friend's mother would make her sleep in the basement and would not allow her to come upstairs. "They thought I was going to steal something valuable," she laughs. However, after transferring schools, Respondent #3 ceased contact with her friend. Now a senior in high school, Respondent #3 notes that her friends think it is "cool" that she is mixed race and always say "Wow, I've never known someone who is black AND Japanese!"

Respondent #4 feels that her social relationships were not necessarily affected by her mixed race heritage. "I don't think, 'oh they won't want to talk to me because I'm this [race],'" she comments, referring to her friends at school. She notes, however, that she does occasionally have low self-esteem because she feels she doesn't entirely fit in to one particular group. "But I don't like to admit I think that way," she adds. In her opinion, people didn't treat her any differently. Rather, her feelings of "not fitting in" were often internal and stemmed from her insecurity as a teenager. She notes that because it seems

like being mixed race in the Japanese American community is becoming more common, others are more accepting of her mixed race heritage.

“I think I do associate with more Asians since I’m mixed race,” Respondent #5 notes. He states that if he weren’t part Asian, he probably wouldn’t associate with Asian people as much. So in that respect, he does believe his social relationships were affected by his mixed race. He admits that there are times when being mixed race can be difficult, especially as a teenager trying to fit in at school. “When I was hanging out with a bunch of Asians, one of them laughed and called me ‘Hapa.’ I got mad. I just felt like I was less of a person because I wasn’t fully Japanese.” But in the end, Respondent #5 affirms that he has fully accepted who he is wouldn’t change his background even if it meant he could “fit in better.”

Respondent #6 agrees that his mixed race heritage has played a role in his social relationships while growing up. He confesses that he has both positive and negative experiences with his peers concerning his race. “Some of my friends were dickheads about me being Japanese,” he affirms. Throughout junior high and high school they would tease him about how America bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “After awhile I stopped hanging out with them because I couldn’t put up with their crap anymore,” he declares. However, Respondent #6 also maintains some positive social relationships while in high school. “I had some really good friends who didn’t look at me like I was Japanese or white, they just looked at me for who I was,” he adds. He claims that these are the friends he is still close to now. In addition to his friends from school, Respondent #6 also has what he calls his “Asian friends.” He has met many of them through the Japanese American Citizen League’s local youth group. “I’ve always liked hanging

around with Asian people because I felt like I could be more of myself around them,” he offers.

Respondent #7 reveals that her mixed race heritage has affected her social relationships, in that she doesn't prefer to hang out with only other Asians. “I think if I was full white I might not mind hanging out with just Asians because I wouldn't be stereotyped as smart or cliquey,” she states. She is also not too fond of the “Asian pride thing,” in which Asian cliques focus so much on their own race and culture. Yet, she claims that she doesn't just choose her friends based on their race. Her friends tend to be from various ethnic backgrounds and she believes they tend to befriend each other because they are either ethnically diverse or open minded.

Their Feelings Concerning Self-Esteem

The self-esteem of each respondent seemed only minimally affected by their mixed race heritage, although their answers varied along a continuum. Respondent #1 assures that his self-esteem is “through the roof” and stresses that being mixed race has not played a role in his self-esteem. “Being comfortable with who you are will determine your self-esteem,” he adds. “If you're happy with how you act and how you treat people, then you're alright.”

Similar to Respondent #1, Respondent #2 agrees that his racial background didn't really play into his self-esteem while growing up. However, he does admit that there are certain situations in which he doesn't feel as accepted. “Sometimes you feel like you don't belong to any community, so you're going to feel less good about yourself,” he confesses. “But it's not something you can change, so I don't dwell on it.”

Respondent #3 concurs that being mixed race doesn't really affect her self-esteem. Rather, she says it "kind of pisses me off" when people bring up race as an issue. "Why does that [race] matter?" she asks. When she gets called a "Chink" or "Jap" she doesn't let it offend her. "I just turn around and say, 'hey that's not cool, do you know what that means?'"

Respondent #4 thinks she has "pretty normal" self-esteem, but admits she does have ups and downs. "I think it kind of depends on the situation," she reflects. "Sometimes I think I have low self-esteem because I feel like I'm not entirely fitting in." Nevertheless, there are also times that she feels good about being different. She notes that her self-esteem also hinges on what else is going on in her life. "Like if I have low self-esteem due to other factors, it [her mixed race] sort of bothers me more." One aspect of her mixed race that did bother her was the idea that she had no culture. "I felt like I didn't have any real culture that was distinct where I could fit in with other people," she states. "It does kind of bother me because people will have distinct holidays that they celebrate and we didn't really celebrate anything particular or out of the ordinary. I felt like we should have celebrated more holidays that were specifically Caucasian or Japanese." Yet, Respondent #4 eventually realized that she did have some culture. "I realized that I would say 'hashi' instead of chopstick, but I didn't realize this was actually out of the ordinary until I was older." She also notes that because Caucasian culture is so mainstream she also grew up learning and participating in it, but it just wasn't as obvious.

Describing his self-esteem as "pretty good," Respondent #5 notes that he is happy with himself, other than the typical superficiality that comes with being a teenager. "Sometimes I'll be like, 'oh my god, I have a huge pimple!'" he laughs, "but other than

that, my self-esteem is fine.” Like Respondent #2 and #3, he admits that he does want to fit in, and at times his mixed race can make it difficult. In this respect, he does feel that his mixed race has affected his self-esteem, but overall he is proud of his heritage and wouldn’t change his racial background.

Respondent #6 says that overall, his self-esteem is “mostly alright” and that race doesn’t necessarily play a part in his self-esteem. Rather, he articulates that what he accomplishes, whether he has been a “good boy” or not, and how fit he is, tend to determine how he feels about himself on a daily basis. However, when asked, he does admit that his friends teasing him about his race did affect his self-esteem. “It made me wish that I was either one side or the other – that I didn’t have to be half and half,” he recalls. “If I was full Japanese I could’ve just said, ‘Screw you guys, I’m going to hang out with all the other Asian kids.’ But because I was half, I felt like I couldn’t do that.” Due to his mixed race heritage, he felt as though he had to associate with both groups, not just one or the other.

Like Respondent #3, Respondent #7 believes her self-esteem can go up and down depending on where she is and whom she’s with. “Our society sucks in that only if you’re white are you pretty and only recently has it been that Asian beauty or something different is sort of beautiful now.” She notes that it was especially difficult for her in middle school because most of the student body was white. “With white people,” she adds, “I feel like all they see is my race.” She often feels that her self-esteem is better when she is around other Asians because she feels like her appearance is less important and she isn’t judged as much by her race. “It’s hard because sometimes I feel like if you’re blonde, you’re automatically pretty even though you can be butt ugly,” she laughs. “You can just wake

up and look cute, and having the double eyelids, the make-up is so much easier.” She also notes that she can be shy and self-conscious at times, “not because I’m ugly, but subconsciously it [my mixed race heritage] is always there.” She recalls a time when she and some friends were dancing at “The Mug,” a local hangout at her college. At the time, she felt like no guys were dancing with her. However, she reflects that her shyness may have had more to do with it than the fact that she looks Asian. She does feel, however, that seeing more Asians in the media and in mainstream culture could help Asians feel more accepted and have better self-esteem. “Lucy Liu is one of my favorite actresses because she is someone I can look up to. There aren’t many [Asian actresses]. Like how are we supposed to learn to do our eye make-up?” she laughs.

Discussion

Despite a handful of negative experiences during their childhood, each respondent described having positive feelings regarding his or her mixed race heritage. Currently, respondents did not identify any health or emotional problems resulting from their mixed race background. Thus, this study is consistent with current literature (Cooney & Radina, 2000) that found insignificant differences between single-race and multiracial young adults when looking at school, behavioral, and psychological functions.

The research also corresponds with that of Cooney & Radina (2000), Oware (2003), and Renn (2003), who note that racial identity is unique for each individual. This is exemplified by the different ways in which each respondent identified him or herself racially. Some respondents (#1 and #5) tended to identify with a single race, while the remaining respondents identified multiracially, claiming both their mother and father’s racial identity.

In regards to how the respondents came to identify themselves racially, the results were consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Model. Like this model, environmental influences, such as family and social relationships, seemed to play a large role in the identity formation of the mixed race respondents. In addition, identity theory further corresponded to how respondents identified themselves racially. Respondents seemed to identify themselves based on the close relationships they had with family members of that race. For example, Respondent #1 identified himself as "100% Japanese" and correspondingly shows strong connections to his Japanese American mother and extended family. Claiming that their Japanese American fathers greatly influenced them, Respondent #5 and #6 also tended to identify more with their Japanese American heritage, although Respondent #5 still mainly identifies simply as "American." The remaining respondents voiced a strong connection with their mother and father and correspondingly identified with the races of both their parents. For example, Respondents #2, #3, #4, #5, and #7 all had close relationships with their extended family on both their mother and father's side. Because they were embraced by both cultures, they tended to identify bi-culturally as well. More specifically, Respondent #1, #2, #3, and #4 voiced having very close relationships with their mothers. This seemed to affect how they identified themselves and also led to greater knowledge and involvement in the Japanese American community. All respondents expressed having a strong connection to their Japanese American culture and displayed a sense of pride in being a part of the Japanese American community. This coincided with research done by Stephan & Stephan (1991) who found that mixed race students may hold a greater appreciation for their own culture. This was true for all respondents, who noted that they were proud of their Japanese

American heritage and active in the Japanese American community. Furthermore, this sense of cultural connectedness seemed to influence how they identified themselves, as each identified themselves as being at least a quarter Japanese.

Although the results of this study did indicate some negative emotional consequences stemming from their mixed race heritage, overall, the respondents' mixed race heritage only minimally affected their experiences with family, social relationships, school, and self-esteem. All of the respondents generally agreed that their family and extended family did not treat them differently due to their mixed race. However, several of them did voice specific incidences that made them feel somewhat out of place. Respondent #4, #5, and #7 claimed that at one point they did feel rather self-conscious around their extended family members. However, they felt that for the most part, these feelings were internal and that their family did not actually treat them any differently due to their mixed race.

When asked about how their mixed race heritage affected their social relationships, respondents voiced varying opinions. Respondent #1 felt that his racial background did not affect how others treated him. This coincides with his notion that his mixed race heritage does not play a major role in any aspect of his life. However, the remaining respondents claimed that their racial background did influence their social relationships. Yet, the extent to which these relationships were affected varied. For example, Respondent #4 felt that her social relationships were minimally affected and that her feelings of "not fitting in" stemmed from her own insecurity, rather than how her friends actually treated her. Respondent #5 noted that he was affected and tended to "hang out with other Asians" due to his mixed race heritage. In addition, interestingly,

Respondents #5 and #7 made contradictory comments when asked how their mixed race affected their social relationships. Respondent #5 noted that he tended to befriend other Asians due to his Japanese heritage. However, Respondent #7 voiced that she didn't often befriend other Asians, mainly to avoid being stereotyped as part of an Asian clique. These contradicting perspectives may stem from the different geographic locations and demographics of the two respondents. The large Asian American population in California, where Respondent #7 resides, may make the Asian cliques more apparent, whereas, Respondent #5 grew up in Murray, Utah where Asians compose a lesser percentage of the overall population. Therefore, due to the minority of Asians, cliques and stereotypes of Asians may be less apparent. In addition, because Asians are a minority in Utah, individuals of Asian descent may be more likely to befriend one another.

Respondents also voiced that their mixed race background rarely, if ever, influenced their experiences in school or whom they associated with. Although Respondent #3 voiced some concerns with peers while in elementary school, in high school, all respondents noted that their racial background did not affect their grades or their ability to perform. In fact, the respondents generally agreed that they enjoyed being unique and that others were very accepting of their mixed race heritage.

Unlike the other two respondents, Respondent #3 voiced more concerns stemming from her mixed race heritage. Although she now has a positive outlook of her racial identity, this was not always the case. Respondent #3's experience being half African American made it difficult because others often "considered me black," rather than "black and Japanese." More so than the other respondents, the fact that she looks black may have led her to experience more difficulties with her racial identity growing up.

Regarding self-esteem, respondents' comments varied less. One common perspective was mentioned by Respondents #2, #4, #5, #6, and #7. They voiced that although their mixed race did not play a major role in their self-esteem, it did sometimes prevent them from feeling like they fit in. Also, these respondents maintained that only in certain situations did they feel self-conscious being an outsider in a social group. Therefore, rather than consistently having negative feelings regarding self-esteem, respondents felt that only in specific incidences did their mixed race heritage affect how they felt about themselves.

Several limitations were present in this study. First, because an interpretive strategy was used, the causes for the results found cannot be definitively established and implications for the research are limited by the small sample size. In addition, by using availability sampling, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population and the reliability of the results is subject to the respondent's reporting. Third, the educational level of this sample, all young adults, may make the respondents non-representative of the larger population. Fourth, this sample is taken from only two locations within the United States, and therefore, may not be fully representative of the Japanese American mixed race population. Lastly, limitations may be associated with the interpretation of results, as others may interpret the data differently.

In addition to limitations, to determine whether these results may be true for other mixed race young adults, further research is necessary. Specifically, research must identify whether mixed race Japanese American young adults differ from mixed race young adults from other racial backgrounds. In addition, studies utilizing multiple sources

of information, such as both parents and the adolescent, may be helpful in obtaining greater insight into the validity of these findings.

Just as social workers have become more conscious of culture and ethnicity when working with clients, they must also become more aware of the complex issues surrounding the blending of cultures. By becoming cognizant of the unique experiences of mixed race young adults, social workers can take an even larger step towards cultural competence. In addition, as social workers gain greater awareness of mixed race individuals, they can become advocates for this growing population. By increasing the recognition of the mixed race population, social workers can help society recognize these individuals as legitimate individuals who should be accepted and embraced by society.

The Experiences of Japanese American Mixed Race Young Adults Consent to Participate

The purpose of this research is to learn more about the experiences of mixed race young adults and how these experiences affect their identity formation. Specifically, this study will explore how being mixed race shapes young adults' self-perceptions, and affects other aspects of their lives, such as family, social relationships, and school.

I am an undergraduate social work student at the University of Utah and will be conducting this study as a continuation of my undergraduate research studies. This research will be used only for the purposes of my Senior Honors Thesis, and if used for further purposes, separate University approval will be obtained.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you fall within the age classifications and are of mixed heritage. This study is completely voluntary and there are no negative consequences for withdrawing. The researcher and participant have the right to start but not finish this study. If termination occurs, all data collected will be destroyed.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer a series of questions related to your experiences as a mixed race young adult in an interview conducted by the researcher. The duration of the interview will last no longer than one hour. Possible risk factors from your participation are no greater than normal daily activity. However, you cannot expect to be compensated for any injury or harm that result from your participation in the above study.

Data collected during the interview will be kept in strict confidence. Only the supervisor and researcher will have access to this information. Data collected during the interview will be recorded and transcribed for research purposes only. Following the interview, the tape will be locked and later destroyed when the research project concludes. In addition, information concerning your participation will be kept strictly confidential and your individual identity will be removed from all records.

The researcher for this study is Shelley Doi and the supervisor is Dr. Grafton Hull. If you have any further questions that I have not answered, you may contact either of us by calling 581-3571.

I _____ have agreed to participate in the study
print name
described above. Your signature indicates that you have read and understood the
information in this consent form and are willing to participate in this study. A copy of this
consent form will be given to you.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's signature _____ Date _____

Interview Questions

The Experiences of Japanese American Mixed Race Young Adults: A Study of Identity Formation

1. Can you tell me about your feelings, either positive or negative, concerning your mixed race heritage?
2. Describe your relationship with your parent(s)?
3. Describe your experiences in school (grades, friends, etc.).
4. Do you feel that being mixed race affected these school experiences you mentioned?
5. Where were you born and raised?
6. Describe experiences with your family, including extended family.
7. Did being mixed race influence these relationships? If so, how?
8. What is your racial make-up (i.e. Caucasian and Chinese)?
9. How do you identify yourself when someone asks "What are you?"
10. Do you always identify yourself in this way, or does it change depending on the context?
11. Why do you think you choose to identify as _____, opposed to identifying in a different way?
12. Has being mixed race influenced whom you associate with?
13. How would you describe your self-esteem?
14. Does being mixed race play a role in your self-esteem?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences as a mixed race young adult?

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